RESTLESS TILL WE REST IN THEE

November 19, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 19:1-10

"My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord."
-Psalm 84:2 (RSV)

A young adult I know told me that there is one television show, "Thirtysomething," she never misses because it deals so honestly with the world as she sees it. "Thirtysomething" is not descriptive of the world in which I am living these days so I confess I have not seen the show. But not long after our conversation I was surprised and pleased to encounter "Thirtysomething" in a scholarly theological journal. It seems that earlier this year, Michael, who works in an ad agency, finds himself wandering into a synagogue service. He hasn't been anywhere near a synagogue for years, but when his wife and infant daughter are in an automobile accident, he seems driven toward some deeper context within which to deal with the shakiness he feels. Synagogue is the only such place he knows. And to a friend who wonders what he's doing lurking around the edges of religion, he answers. "I don't know. I think maybe I believe." [Craig Dykstra, A Fresh Awakening, Theology Today, July 1989]

One day, two thousand years ago, in the city of Jericho, lush, beautiful, affluent, a highly successful executive did something similar. He didn't go to synagogue because he wasn't welcome. He worked for the government and in so doing cut himself off from his own religious community. But he was very wealthy. And one day, self-made success that he was, he climbed up a tree to see Jesus of Nazareth who happened to be passing through the city. My sense is that if someone had asked him what he was doing up that tree he probably would have said something like, "I don't know. I think maybe I believe."

His story has a very contemporary ring to it. I've always liked him a lot. He is one of the most vivid, and most human characters in the Bible. Some of my affection, I am sure, is because of a song I remember, singing it myself, and hearing it sung by a sequence of Sunday School classes over the years, usually featuring one of my children in a starring role.

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
for the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Savior passed that way,
He looked up in that tree: And he said;
'Zacchaeus: - you come down'
For I am going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!'"

That simple little song conveys a lot of complexity actually. I want to explore it a bit later. For now let Zacchaeus represent the human quest for God, the search for meaning, purpose, peace of mind, personal fulfillment: the age-old human quest for something more than life delivers, even when we accomplish everything we set out to accomplish. Zacchaeus is up a tree looking for God and his search is reflected in a very real way within our own culture.

One of the real surprises, as we move into the last decade of the Twentieth Century is that faith is in, the search is on, God is back. Nobody expected it. Religion was supposed to go away. All our best thinkers said so, the ones who have shaped our world... Karl Marx... Sigmund Freud... the great philosophers of the last century. As science answered all of history's puzzles, one by one, and as human progress in education, technology, medicine and social welfare enhanced the quality of life for all people, religion would become a kind of anachronism. So F. Scott Fitzgerald coined a signature for the 1920s - "All wars fought. All Gods dead" - neither one of which turned out to be true, or relevant for that matter.

What a surprise to witness the return of God and religion. Dan Wakefield, screen writer and novelist, in his book Returning, chronicled his own faith journey through the comfortable agnosticism of academia, to atheism, to an almost religious trust in psychotherapy; then to the seductive hedonism of success, which resulted in physical and emotional burn-out. And finally, back to religion. Earlier this year Wakefield wrote a feature article for the New York Times Review of Books. "And Now, a Word From our Creator!" The Times had asked him to write about a peculiar phenomenon in American literature... namely "the growing number of new literary works in which God - who for so long seemed absent if not 'dead' as an object of concern in serious fiction - has returned as a force or a 'character' in the action."

"Sometimes," Wakefield quipped, "God not only is present in the narrative, but has a speaking part." More often, it is human longing for God. [New York Times Book Review, 2/12/89]

In a Hugh Nississen short story an Israeli high school teacher, who is a totally secular, modern man, weeps when the Israelis recapture the old Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. "Why," asked Nississen, "do you care if you're not religious?" And all the man can say in response is "You'd think by now we'd be finished with Him once and for all."

One of the hot books everybody is either reading or thinking about reading is The Power of Myth, the narrative account of Professor Joseph Campbell talking to Bill Moyers on PBS. Someone said recently that "if you mention God more than once at a dinner party (at least in New York City) you aren't invited back." "But last summer," says Wakefield, "you couldn't go to a dinner party without people talking about God, or at any rate, talking about Bill Moyers' talking to Joseph Campbell about God."

Even Life Magazine carried a cover story in September on the religious experiences of a number of the survivors of the airplane crash at Sioux City, Iowa. "Finding God on Flight 232" announced Life. However, there is a curious twist. In metropolitan New York City God was dropped from the cover and it read simply "Flight 232: The Survivors' Gripping Stories." Apparently God has not come all the way back to New York. When asked about the different covers, a Life executive said, "God sells better in the farm belt," which we who live in Chicago know means everything west of the Hudson River. I'm not sure what the people at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, or Fifth Avenue Presbyterian, would say about that. Chicagoan Martin Marty, always analytically observant, couldn't help pointing out that there are "496,690 Catholics in the Bronx alone. Maybe it's only the editors of Life who haven't heard." [The Christian Century, 10/25/89]

Well, what is going on? Even television is rethinking religion. After decades of being relegated to utter irrelevance... Michael says something theologically honest. "I think I believe again." On the one hand, the literary-cultural information would indicate a significant interest or renewal of interest in religious ideas in religion itself.

The deeper question that needs to be asked, of course, is... "Why do we seem to need God?" What is there about us? Why does Michael stray into the synagogue or Zacchaeus climb a tree? Or to get personal, why did you come here this morning? It wasn't easy. It's cold and miserable and you could be home with a second cup of coffee and the newspaper and if your need for religion is compulsive, you can find some pretty lively, colorful stuff on TV at this hour I am told. Is there a relationship between your being here and this tantalizing search for God that seems to be experiencing a kind of renaissance?

That question itself intrigues us and it too keeps appearing in the literature we read. We were stunned by Alice Walker's The Color Purple, a collection of letters from Celie, a poor black woman in the American South in the 1930s, to God and then to her sister Nettie. Celie's life has included the numbing sequence of tragedy common to poverty - sexual abuse... hunger... family dislocation...

"Dear Nettie,

I don't write to God no more. I write to you. What happen to God? ast Shug. (Shug is a friend)

What God do for me? I ast.

She say, Celie! He gave you life, good health an a good woman that love you to death.

Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown.

She say, Miss Celie, You better hush. God might hear you.

Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you. She talk and she talk, trying to budge me way from blasphemy. But I blaspheme much as want to. All my life I never care what people thought bout nothing I did, I say. But deep in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deef, I reckon. But it ain't easy, trying to do without God. Even if you know he ain't there, trying to do without him is a strain."

Likewise, Joseph Heller, in an irreverent novel about King David, has the aging king reminiscing about his long life, particularly the tragedy of his infant son's death... "He made my baby die. I still have not forgiven Him for that although I feel I need my God now more than ever before, and miss Him more than I would care to let him know." [God Knows, p. 280]

It is one of the great theological questions - What is the source of our need for God? Is it a character deficit in us? Is it a weakness, a psychological insecurity that can be counseled out of us? Is it superstition, ignorance which education will cure? The literature of the day is compelling testimony that science, technology, psychology, education have not caused us to forget God.

In fact, something of the reverse is true... science is asking theological questions today. "Why is there something rather than nothing?" And the same literature that announced God's demise a generation ago now gives God speaking parts.

Far back in our tradition there is a provocative suggestion about the source of our need. Augustine, one of our greatest thinkers, lived in the 4th century, was a late-comer to Christianity, was educated in the classics and began his life-long search for God in philosophy, literature, poetry... all the while enjoying a rather ambitious libido... finally through the love

and patience of his mother, he returned to faith, rose rapidly through the church and became a bishop and one of the truly pivotal thinkers in Western civilization. His Confessions tell about his tortuous religious pilgrimage. Looking back on his life he wrote...

> "When first I knew thee, Thou didst raise
> me up that I might see there was somewhat for
> me to see."

And that beautiful and familiar sentence which captivated me the first time I read it thirty years ago and from which I borrowed the title of this sermon:

> "Thou awakest us for Thyself, and our
> heart is restless, until it repose in
> Thee."

God is the source of our search. Our hunger - for meaning, ultimacy, purpose, peace - is created in us. Our spiritual restlessness is the best part of us. It is what makes us human. Our need for God is not a deficit at all. It is native to us. The Christian proposal is that we are on the right track when we know that need and follow where it leads. I think the artists and musicians know that although they do not often use traditional religious language and are not always comfortable with the structure of traditional religion. But the artists know that we are never more human than when we are aware of the transcendent - when we stretch to touch it, or see it, or paint it or play it... Picasso once criticized Matisse for designing a chapel. Both artists were professed atheists. Matisse retorted - "Yes, I do pray: and you pray too, and you know it very well: when everything goes badly we throw ourselves into prayer. And you do it too... It's no good saying no." [John Updike, Self Consciousness, p. 220]

So back past "Thirtysomething" and Joseph Heller and Alice Walker and Dan Wakefield and Joseph Campbell; back past Augustine to that little man sitting in a tree. What is he doing there?

Zacchaeus was wealthy and short. He got wealthy by collecting taxes for the Romans and keeping what he could get away with for himself. That is to say, in order to become wealthy, he had to betray his religious tradition, collaborate with a hated enemy and consequently, live in absolute alienation from everything that gave other people their deepest joy. His religious quest is not academic. He's not simply curious about the meaning of life. He's desperate. He's living in hell... He needs salvation. He is cut-off from everything and everyone and he's done it to himself. The search for God is precipitated by the miserable, lonely hell of his life.

Zacchaeus, from a distance of 2,000 years, that is to say, looks a lot like what modern psychologists know as "victims of success"... people who have staked everything they are in the pursuit of a financial or career goal, have achieved it, and now feel miserable. I referred a few weeks ago to a psychotherapist who writes a column in the Washington Post to help "Troubled Winners"... people who are unhappy when they reach the top of the ladder.

The symptoms of the new syndrome, troubled winners - "alienation and addiction to alcohol or cocaine, broken relationships, broken marriages, families, isolation, alienation, depression."
[New York Times, 8/24/86]

To put that in a theological and Biblical context: separation from God always ends up in alienation from others and from one's own best self. And although obviously no one here this morning is a "troubled winner," or a "victim of success," or even a Zacchaeus up a tree, wealthy and unhappy, my guess is that there is not a one of us who is altogether unfamiliar with this dynamic.

And the suggestion is that God is responsible for whatever restlessness you feel. God, I believe, raises the issue. If it weren't for God, we might actually be satisfied when we achieve our financial and vocational goals. When we pass the Bar exam, or become a partner, or make six figures, or get elected president, or can afford a BMW or a holiday in London - it's at that very moment that someone raises a question... a minority report... an itch we can't quite scratch. It's just when we have it made that from somewhere deep inside us comes a flicker of doubt. Is this what it's about? Have you got it all? Have you given yourself to something big enough? God is the source of our salvation, but in the process God is also the source of no little discomfort and pain, and dis-ease and anxiety. Thou! "Thou hast made our hearts restless..."

Zacchaeus' search led him to do something bold, impetuous, unlikely. He sat around feeling miserable long enough, spent enough evenings feeling empty, alone, drinking too much and falling deeper and deeper into his depression. One day he decided to pursue the search when he heard about a young rabbi from Nazareth coming to town.

So may your search lead you to do something bold, maybe even something unlikely -

go to church again...
love again...
open and vulnerable...
give yourself away...

And then, please note, the best part of all, that it is just when he does that, when he pushes through his surprised neighbors and climbs a tree, just when the search leads him to throw caution and convention to the wind, to do something impulsive and risky, that Jesus looks up and sees him.

In the midst of searching, he is found.

The story suggests that in the midst of alienation, Jesus sees those who are searching and cuts through years of self-imposed exile and all the "type-As" striving and climbing and pushing... all the consequent isolation and loneliness and says, "Come down. I'm going to your house today."

That good word is for you. In your search for God you will be found.

"My soul longs - yea faints for
the courts of the Lord," wrote the Psalmist centuries ago.

We are restless until we rest in God.

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"Great art Thou, O Lord...
Thou awakest us to delight in
Thy praise; for Thou madest us for
Thyself and our heart is
restless, until it repose in Thee..." Amen.